

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1531-1535

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Originally, Andrew had planned to explore the rest of the ruins. However, that sudden appearance of the black-furred beast had really shaken everyone up. If they kept wandering around, the stone ruins of the old village were tight and narrow, with terrible visibility.

If that creature decided to come back for revenge, Andrew would not be afraid- but the others were already spooked.

"Andy, what now? That thing just killed someone in broad daylight. We can either take it out first, or we find the entrance to the treasure-fast."

Outside the ruins, Andrew had just finished scrubbing the blood off himself when Logan came charging up, furious and frustrated.

Andrew shot him a cold glance and asked, "Why are you panicking? A couple of people die, and you're already panicking? If that's the case, why don't you take the Keller family and get out of here before you all end up dead too?"

Logan snapped, "I'm not panicking or scared. But it's insane that a group this big is letting a single black-furred beast mess with our heads like this. I couldn't care less about Ralph dying, but that monster killed one of us right under our noses. I want its damn head."

Andrew did not waste time on Logan's empty rage. He turned his eyes toward the endless mountain ridges around them and muttered, "Have you noticed something weird about that Dire Tiger? It's way too big, and the timing is too perfect. It showed up right when we stepped into the village.

"More importantly, it attacked during the day. Even apex predators like tigers usually avoid humans during daylight."

Logan gritted his teeth and growled, "Who knows where that monster got the nerve to come at us in broad daylight? But I don't care. What matters is that we find it and kill it."

Andrew let out a cold scoff. "Great. Then go track it down. You saw which way it ran, didn't you? Take your crew and go after it."

Logan suddenly went quiet, awkwardly laughing. "You want me to lead a team and chase that thing? Come on, Andy. You're basically sending me to my death."

Andrew ignored him and headed back to the temporary camp just outside the ruins. Natasha and Tiana were already eating, whereas

Chantelle sat nearby, completely

spaced out. Her hair was a mess, her face pale, and she looked like her soul had just left her body.

Clearly, that earlier attack had shaken her more than anyone else.

"Andy, we can't keep searching like this. I think we should just head back to the village at the foot of the mountain and regroup," Tiana said cautiously.

Andrew shook his head. "No. I'm sure the entrance to the treasure is hidden somewhere in these ruins."

Tiana blinked in shock. "How can you be so sure?"

Andrew's tone went cold. "Magnus wasn't ambushed or taken by surprise. He came here alone, and he snuck into this place on

Until now, he still hasn't

We made a hell of a lot of noise earlier, but he never came out. So, there's only one explanation-he found the entrance and went in."

Tiana's jaw dropped, looking completely stunned.

Andrew grabbed some rations and began wolfing them down. He had to keep his strength at its peak.

Even though the fight with that

beast was over in just one blow, it

had drained him. There was only so

much a human body could take. Fighting off a tiger was not some fantasy out of an old heroic novel.

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Besides, all the most famous fictional heroes in literature were just fighting a

common jungle tiger. Moreover, even the largest big cats in the country were a nightmare to face. Yet, compared to the black-furred Dire Tiger, those looked like its smaller cousins.

That alone said everything about how much raw power Andrew needed to face it head-on.

The valley was surrounded on all sides by towering mountain peaks. The sun moved quickly through the sky, and by just past 1.00 p.m., the shadows had already swallowed most of the canyon. Sunlight had vanished behind the cliffs, and a heavy, suffocating gloom settled in over the group.

Two of Logan's best men had started shivering uncontrollably, and it took a harsh round of shouting from Logan to finally shut them up.

Another two hours passed, but Andrew still had not figured out a solid way to search the ruins effectively. Even Natasha had run out of patience by then and quietly begged him to consider heading back down the mountain.

Andrew let out a sigh. He was willing to take the risk, but the others clearly were not built for this kind of grind. Maybe they should head back down, rest up, and then reassess.

However, if they did leave, the trip down and back would take the better part of a day. And now, the sky was already starting to dim again. Even if they planned to return, it would have to be tomorrow at the earliest.

With so much delay, even if the treasure truly existed, it was likely already in Rafael's hands-or worse, Magnus'.

Just then, a few dust-covered figures stumbled out from the ruins. It was Kevin and three guards from the Wright family.

"This is such a goddamn waste of time. What kind of treasure would be hidden in a dump like this? Andrew you can keep looking if you want, but I'm done. Bye!" Kevin barked out his frustration, glared at Andrew, and then led the Wright family guards straight out of the canyon.

Tiana let out a long sigh. "Andy, maybe it's time we pulled out too. It took a hell of a lot just to piece together that treasure map. And now, finding the actual location is proving even harder. What if we returned to Blumedale, regrouped, and brought in professionals? We could do it right."

Andrew's voice was flat. "We can leave if you want. But if we do, the treasure's as good as gone. I'm not chasing this for the gold. All I care about is making sure Rafael and Mosby don't get their filthy hands on it. More importantly, I owe Mr. and Ms. Bates some closure

Tiana's tone softened. "I get it. I really do. But look around, Andy-we're out of options. The Wright family's gone, and honestly, I've got nothing left in the tank either."

Andrew stood up and made his call. "Alright. Then, we'll pull back to the village at the foot of the mountain. I need to speak with Chief Flintspire anyway. There's something he needs to confirm for me."

Just then, Chantelle stepped forward, her expression firm. "Mr. Lloyd, we can't leave yet."

Andrew raised an eyebrow, letting out a half-laugh. "Can't leave? What, you actually want to keep going?"

Chantelle's lips trembled. "It's not that I want to, but someone knows where the entrance is."

Andrew narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Chantelle's eyes lit up as a faint smile formed. "Tora. He knows where it is. Last night, you saved his life, remember? Looks like luck's on his side-he made it. Come with me. He says he'll only reveal the location if he sees you in person."

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Half-convinced but intrigued, Andrew followed Chantelle to the other side of the camp. Tiana, Logan, and a few others exchanged uncertain looks before trailing behind.

Under a large tree, Tora had already been untied and was now seated on a flat rock. The wounds on his body left by the Blood Ghoul no longer festered. The edges had turned a healthy red, and the poison had clearly worked its way out.

"Mr. Lloyd, I owe you my life. Thank you," Tora said as he spotted Andrew. He pushed himself to his feet and dropped to one knee.

Andrew motioned for him to sit, checking over his condition. Then, he smiled and said, "Congratulations, Captain Tora. The necrotic venom is completely gone."

Tora nodded, visibly relieved. "I didn't think I'd make it out alive. When I came to and realized you were all gone, I figured you'd gone deeper into this cursed place."

Andrew replied, "You figured right. We did, but we came up empty-handed."

Logan, growing impatient, jumped in. "Captain Tora, you said you knew where the treasure entrance was. Just tell us and we'll make sure you're well compensated."

Tora looked directly at Andrew. "I don't know if it's the actual entrance, but I believe it leads somewhere else important. So, Mr. Lloyd, I can't promise it's what you're looking for... but it might help."

Andrew's eyes lit up. He had not expected a breakthrough to come so suddenly. "Go ahead, Captain. Whether it leads to the treasure or not, I'll remember you helped."

Tora nodded. "It's an old dry well. Come with me, Mr. Lloyd. I'll take you there."

Ten minutes later, the team geared up and returned to the ruins once again.

This time, with Tora guiding them, they no longer wandered aimlessly. He led them straight to an ancient well. It was so deep that they could not see the bottom. The opening was wide enough for a grown man to descend without issue.

Tora pointed down into the dark, and he seemed terrified as he said, "This is where I saw a Blood Ghoul crawl out. Mr. Lloyd, when they're not active Blood Ghouls retreat to underground lairs-places soaked in dark, heavy energy."

"So, I figured even if this isn't the treasure entrance, it has to lead somewhere important. Maybe once you're down there, you'll find a way into the treasure vault."

Tiana's voice was sharp and full of doubt. "Tora, are you seriously expecting us to jump down a bottomless pit filled with those fiends? Are you trying to get us all killed? You call this a lead? It seems more like a death trap."

Tora shook his head quickly. "No, it's not like that-I truly believe this could help. But if you don't trust me, just forget I said anything."

Andrew stared into the well for a

moment

long moment, then slowly started to smile. "Captain Tora, this is a huge lead. You're right. Whether or not it's the entrance, there's no doubt connects to something critical. At the very least, we might find clues

that get us closer."

Logan hesitated. "But Andy... are we really doing this? I mean, that place is full of Blood Ghouls!"

Andrew nodded. "We're going... We have to. The more I think about it, the more I realize that this treasure from the Fallen Crimson Dynasty might not be just a vault full of riches.

"There's a good chance it's actually a top-tier geomantic tomb. And what people have been after all this time might be the treasures buried with it."

Chantelle was taken aback. "Mr. Lloyd, what makes you think that?"

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Andrew chuckled. "You all remember what was written on the treasure map, right? 'The Fallen Crimson Dynasty treasure... the Underworld Kingdom of the Dead, the bliss of the fallen, the hell of the living.'

"The Underworld Kingdom of the Dead, the bliss of the fallen—that sounds exactly like an underground empire, like Emperor Zenith's tomb. And in ancient times, only something like the royal tomb could be built on such a massive scale. At the very least, it had to belong to some insanely rich tycoon or a powerful warlord."

He paused, letting that sink in before continuing, "Captain Tora saw a Blood Ghoul crawl out of this place the Underworld Kingdom of the Dead, the bliss of the fallen. Doesn't that mean it came from one of those burial chambers?"

"If we head down this well, we're probably entering the underground tomb. And once we're in, it'll only be a matter of time before we find the treasure."

Tiana's eyes lit up. "You're absolutely right, Andy! That makes so much sense." Logan burst into laughter and clapped. "Damn, Andy, you really are a genius."

Chantelle looked at Andrew with a strangely admiring gaze. "Mr. Lloyd, at this point, you're the only one still calm and clear-headed. You've kept this entire mission under control from the start."

Andrew motioned for Logan to bring over the climbing ropes, then tossed them straight into the well. "Let's go down before it gets too dark to see. Everything depends on this."

Tora stepped back. "Mr. Lloyd, I wish you all the best of luck."

Logan blinked in surprise. "Captain, are you not coming with us? If we strike gold, there'll be a cut in it for you too."

Tora shook his head and gave a wry smile. "I'm still injured. I'd rather head back down the mountain and recover. Besides, all of the Wright family guys have left. Honestly, I was never that into this treasure hunt anyway. I'd like to stay alive, thank you very much."

Andrew nodded. "Then take care on the way down, Captain. Oh, and one more thing, you might want to rethink your loyalty to Kevin."

Tora's expression darkened. "No need to rethink anything. I was loyal-fiercely loyal to him and the family. But that man watched me die without blinking. Hell, he even

en Redie

ordered it. That moment told me everything I needed to know-Mr. I

Wright Senior's not worth dying for."

With that, he turned and limped away from the ruins, making his way back down the mountainside.

Tiana smiled faintly. "I have to admit that Tora's got some backbone."

Andrew grunted. "That's exactly why I thought he deserved to live."

He checked the stability of the ropes, gave a nod, and then descended into the darkness first.

Tiana, Chantelle, and Natasha

followed one by one, moving quickly but cautiously. Logan stayed behind to cover the rear, and once everyone was down, he brought up the tail and dropped in last.

The canyon, surrounded by steep peaks, was slowly swallowed by an eerie dusk.

Darkness crept in once more. In

truth, it was only just past 6 p.m

and the sunset had barely begun. Yet, the golden light of dusk could not touch this place at all.

Not even a flicker of the sun made it past the looming cliffs. In that dense, stifling darkness, the silence was almost absolute.

Soft footsteps broke the stillness near the well.

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"That sworn brother of mine really is something else he actually found the entrance. But I'm no slouch either. Let's head down. It's payday, boys!"

It was Kevin and his men.

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The well was deep. Andrew estimated they had already descended about 150 feet, so he shone his high-powered flashlight downward. However, the bottom was still swallowed in darkness, with no end in sight.

Tiana gasped. "A typical well is about 45 feet deep at most? We've come down the equivalent of 15 stories, and it still goes on? How in the world did the people of Gallow's End manage to dig something this deep?"

Andrew continued his descent with steady movements. "No idea. But maybe this well wasn't dug for water, and maybe it wasn't even made by the villagers of Gallow's End."

The climbing rope was top-grade, industrial-strength. It could hold the weight of about eight people dangling at once without issue.

Andrew held the flashlight in one hand while gripping the rope tightly with the other, and a safety harness was clipped to his waist. He kicked lightly against the stone wall, letting his body drop faster using gravity to his advantage.

Tiana called down, "Andy, be careful!"

As the speed increased, the wind started howling past his ears. He clenched the flashlight between his teeth and freed one hand. He needed it in case something tried to attack from below-his combat knife had to be ready at a moment's notice.

The blackness below still gave nothing away.

Another 300 feet down, Andrew finally jerked to a stop. The sudden tension in the rope caused everyone else-Chantelle, Tiana, and the others to sway and jolt behind him.

Chantelle called out, tense. "Mr. Lloyd, what is it?"

Andrew exhaled slowly. "I can see the bottom."

What he did not mention was that the sight down there was straight out of a nightmare-bones... piles and piles of human remains.

Minutes later, the entire team made it to the bottom safely. However, every single one of them looked visibly shaken. There was nowhere clean to place their feet, just heaps of brittle corpses.

No one could possibly stomach the sight.

Even Logan, who prided himself on being tough, turned pale. He muttered, "Where did all these bodies come from? Just eyeballing it... there's gotta be over a hundred skeletons here. Even back in the day, Gallow's End couldn't have had this many people dying, right?"

Andrew's face remained unreadable, and he said nothing. He swept his flashlight slowly across the space, then turned and moved toward the only visible passageway.

The tunnel was just tall enough for someone to crawl through, stretching sideways into pitch-black uncertainty. Honestly, the well did not even seem like a proper water source. If anything, it looked more like a ventilation shaft or a hidden escape route. Content bétongs to

Andrew had not seen a single sign of water down there. Normally, even a dry well would have traces of moss or signs of past moisture. Yet, this place had nothing-just smooth, bone-dry stone and those chilling remains.

The passage ahead was completely dark, with no light whatsoever. Luckily, they had come prepared.

Flashlights, flares, and backup gear-they had it all. So, despite the eerie atmosphere, their trek was steady and manageable.

After about 100 feet, the tunnel finally ended. Right in front of them stood three stone coffins. They sat quietly in a small chamber carved out of stone, lined up side by side.

Andrew froze in place, eyes locked on the three caskets. Chantelle stepped up behind him, her throat dry as she instinctively edged closer. "Mr. Lloyd, the lids are open."

Tiana's face twisted in discomfort as she whispered two words, "Blood Ghouls."

Without saying a thing, Andrew raised a hand and gestured for Logan to circle to the other side.

Once Logan was in position, Andrew moved step by step toward the nearest coffin. He leaned forward carefully and peeked inside.

He let out a quiet breath when he noticed the coffin was empty. Seeing Andrew relax, Logan came closer too.

They checked the other two coffins as well and found them both empty.

Nonetheless, 'empty' did not mean nothing was there.